

Midsummer in the Shortgrass Country finds early spring roundup drawing to a close. Most outfits are through with their April shearing, and May work should get underway by the end of June. Should the truck, labor, and money shortages ease a bit, the spring busy season could be completed by the middle of August. I can already see that the usual two-week lamb shipping rush is going to take less than 60 days.

Our recent shearing went so smoothly, I'm ashamed to describe it in these troubled times. The capitan arrived at the ranch only 20 days behind schedule. His crew had grown from three to five shearers, so he only lacked seven men to make up the normal number. Why, if all five of his hands had ever worked at the same time he could have sheared close to 300 head of sheep in a single day. Somebody will remark that oldtime rigs used to shear 300 sheep before breakfast; but that "used to" business might as well be stored in the long-gone past.

Using five drops made it easier on the ewes and lambs. Two bunches were penned and repenned so many times that the mothers got real good at finding their babies. I'd estimate that we dogied less than 30 percent of the big lambs by being able to get one day's work done in two days. The younger lambs could have run five percent higher, but you can't get everything to work exactly like you want it to.

The sheep punchers functioned better than ever before. On every round, they found four or five turkey nests and counted scads of deer. Their tally on sheep wasn't impressive, but the National Wildlife Foundation couldn't have run a better game census. Oh, maybe the game experts could have beat the cowboys using an airplane or helicopter. What I'm talking about is counting wild game from the ground. I suppose you could take to the air and determine the number of chin whiskers on a mountain sheep.

The men showed admirable fervor at the dinner table. Evidently the hum of the shearing machine stimulated their appetites. Biscuit eating records were made and tumbled. One young waddie carrying a southpaw handicap made as good a hand as I've ever seen in a free-choice feeding operation. It'll be a shame if he doesn't get to use his talents someday in one of those big European food festivals. He can hold his own right now in any of the North American contests.

Horse wrecks followed the same lucky path. Every time an old pony took a jump, the rider jumped in the same direction. On hot afternoons the riding was done on automatic pilot: both the riders and the ridden were mainly looking for a shade. I'm glad the rattlesnakes weren't out, or we'd have had to fly in a case of anti-venom serum.

The vehicles performed perfectly. Not once did we fail to have one in good enough condition to use as a tow truck. Modern day rolling stock is a marvel. For \$50 a day you can keep a 1970 pickup in top running order. People living on a steep hill don't even have to go to that expense.

I don't ever expect to have such a long string of good luck again. Shearing wouldn't be bad at all if we sheep owners were as oblivious to it as the sheep themselves.